

"Think about it," says Nichole as she bumps into the kitchen with a stack of dirty dishes. "Just show her a little attention, a little compliment; she'll ease up on you then."

Bill, out in the dining room on his post lunch-rush break, didn't mean to pull Betty down on his lap; he just meant to grab her wrist and pull her up alongside him, up against his leg to call her a good-looking tomato (a phrase he had heard one of her contemporaries, his father, use) and to tell her she looked like she was losing weight. But Betty had worked a full shift and her old gams were tired. She folded up when the back of her knee hit Bill's thigh, and Bill, in his attempt to scoot across the bench away from the dropping butt, only succeeded in wedging himself, with plump Betty on his lap, between the booth's bench seat and the bottom of the table, very snugly.

There was an initial burst from Betty of mortified and outraged screaming and thrashing and stuck-tight squirming, the sugar and napkin dispensers toppling, the salt and pepper shakers vibrating across the table and over the edge and to the floor. When Betty dislodged herself — scraped thighs, two big runs in her panty hose — and turned to slap Bill silly, Bill bounced out of the other side of the booth and ran, beating Betty to the front door by a step, while Dolores and Nichole laughed themselves sick up by the register.

After a short but unsuccessful chase across the parking lot, Betty stomped back into the restaurant and slapped Nichole hard enough to knock her off her feet, and then she fired her and she fired Dolores, too. But she hired them back the next day, since she'd almost killed herself finishing up their shifts for them along with running the grill for Bill.

Everybody walked on eggshells around Betty for a while, but when she was out of earshot they made merciless fun of Bill, calling him Casanova, and asking him how it felt, those old buns pressed down hard on his lap.

DECOY BLUES

After two hours with Baby Babette, Great Grandma Betty was sorry she had agreed to baby-sit the unweaned child. Even though it was breast milk in the bottle — expressed over the last three days and frozen into amorphous four-ounce globs of murky ice inside Ziploc sandwich bags until microwave time — Babette was having none of it. It was not her mother. So she writhed and twisted and wailed and craned her neck away from the rubber nipple, while Great Grandma

gritted her teeth and considered, for a fleeting moment, committing a horrible crime. The homicidal thoughts scared Betty, and she wisely laid the baby on the floor and banged out the screen door and stood under the porch light's yellow glow — mosquito bait — as she filled her lungs, again and again, with the compelling nicotine. Her next door neighbor pounded on their common wall and shouted, "WHY THE HELL DON'T YOU SHUT THAT GODDAMN KID UP?"

And here came Betty's girl-friend Evelyn's boy-friend Butch sneaking up the stairs. Betty lit another cigarette and said, "Don't even think about it tonight; I'm baby-sittin' Baby Godzilla." "I know," said Butch, rubbing a hand over his shiny bald scalp. "I could hear the kid screamin' from the street. Whadaya doin' to her, torture or what?"

"She wants Mom, wants the tit is all." "I don't blame her," Butch said, then, "Hey, I got an idea: Gimme yours." "My what?" "Your tit. Hand it over." Butch and Betty had been a secret item, clandestine lovers, for six months now. He could ask her this; she could comply. She unbuttoned her blouse and slipped her breast prothesis out of her bra and said, "I don't know what foolishness you're up to; I just wish I had me a video camera to catch it. I gotta feelin' you're gonna go in there and make an idiot of yourself."

Butch came, unannounced, up over the back of the couch with the breast, hovered it an inch above Babette's nose. The baby grabbed the rubber, felt her great grandmother's body heat with her chubby hands, and was satisfied. She kissed the pink nipple, but before she could get rolling, Butch pulled the decoy away and quickly thrust the bottle between her still-pursed lips.

BUTCH EXPERIENCES THE RAPTURE

Butch and his live-in girl-friend got in a fight over religion. Evelyn had gotten serious about the issue after her change of life and she was trying to drag Butch along with her. He went to one of the services — down in the valley at the old fast-food fried chicken joint the parishioners had converted to a place of worship — just to keep the peace, to keep his woman happy, but the young minister with the gleaming white teeth was so quick to pass the plate — and Evelyn was so quick to toss the greenbacks into it — that Butch got disgusted and said, "Fuck this shit," loud enough for everybody in the place to hear, and then he stamped out the door with Evelyn steaming on his tail.